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FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001822

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/18/2017

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: ALEVI GROUPS DEEM CHP "LEAST BAD" OPTION
IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

REF: A. ANKARA 747

1B. ANKARA 1288

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner for reasons 1.4(b),
(d)

1.(C) Summary: Leaders from Turkey's leading Alevi organizations are frustrated that no party on the ballot espouses their main interests: an education free of religious rhetoric, the right to worship freely in cem (prayer) houses, and a secular democratic system not biased toward Sunni Islam. They unite, however, around the common belief that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) pushes an Islamist agenda and presents the most serious threat to their secular, independent way of life. Although Turkey's estimated 15-20 million Alevis are heterogeneous and have never supported one party en masse, our contacts agree that most will vote for the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) because they deem it the "least bad" option. End summary.

Alevi Groups Clear: Anyone But AKP

2.(C) Leaders from Turkey's leading Alevi organizations, including Pir Sultan Abdal Alevi Association President Kazim Genc, Husein Gazi Association official Ali Yildirim, and Professor Izzetin Dogan, Chairman of the Alevi Cem Foundation, conveyed to us in recent meetings their frustration that no party in the current election advances Alevi causes. All party platforms failed sufficiently to take into account Alevis' main demands: an education free of religious rhetoric, the right to worship freely in Alevi cem (prayer) houses, and a secular system not biased toward Sunni Islam.

3.(C) These leaders unanimously view AKP as their greatest threat. Dogan and Yildirim told us AKP's platform and rhetoric promote a strictly Sunni Arabist view of Islam and has done nothing to further Alevi causes. Genc described the GOT's Directorate of Religious Affairs, or Diyanet, as an exclusive, discriminatory Sunni organization that employs only Sunnis, and only meets with Alevi groups that share its views. He found AKP's inclusion of several Alevis on its election list, and PM Erdogan's campaign visits to several Cem houses as disingenuous efforts to attract votes.

4.(C) Other parties also disappointed these Alevis. Neither the Democrat Party (DP) nor the National Action Party (MHP) platforms mentioned Alevis and MHP's espoused Koran courses in school and freedom to wear the turban (headscarf) in government offices and universities, neither of which these Alevi leaders support.

Alevi View CHP as Least-Bad Option

5.(C) CHP's platform is imperfect, but the least objectionable, according to our Alevi contacts. CHP's platform states that the party supports Alevis' right to worship in Cem houses, opt out of now-compulsory religion courses in school, and a Diyanet that supports all religious believers equally. Though several Alevi contacts see CHP as having become alarmingly close to the military, all concurred that a large majority of Alevis would end up voting for CHP.

6.(C) Middle East Technical University (METU) Anthropology professor Aykan Erdemir, Turkey's foremost expert on Alevi issues, is unsurprised that Alevi groups are dismissing AKP's overtures as window dressing. Although Alevis are a heterogeneous group who never support one political line, they share a strong fear that AKP is trying to increase the influence of Sunni Islam by consolidating control of government institutions such as the Diyanet. Erdemir believes most Alevis will conclude that voting for CHP is the most effective way to counter what they see as a dangerous rise in Islam in society.

7.(C) Professor Dogan stressed Alevi patience is running out.

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Unless the new government proves willing to implement fully Article 10 of the Constitution, which establishes the principle of equality of religions, Alevis would have to come together to create their own party. Dogan explained Alevis have avoided this to date because unlike "Arabist Islam," Alevism is not political. He added that Alevis feared creating political divisions based on religion, such as the Sunni-Shia divide that has torn up the Middle East.

8.(C) Comment: Even though Dogan's fear of an Alevi-Sunni political chasm is unrealistic given Alevis' thorough integration into numerous Turkish institutions, many Alevis genuinely feel they are treated as outsiders. AKP's increased outreach to Alevis during the campaign was a positive step toward inclusivity but not nearly enough to overcome Alevis' deep-seated suspicion that AKP is pursuing a secret Islamist agenda or alleviate Alevi resentment at not

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being recognized as a distinct, official religion. Until Alevi groups are able to overcome their differences to form a cohesive coalition or political party, however, they are unlikely to have more than their current "least bad" choice of CHP to represent their interests.

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